

ANSWERLESS

IF YOU NEED A REASON TO LIVE **DON'T** CALL THE SUICIDE HOTLINE



Hurt? Angry? Confused? Alone? Afraid? Depressed? Blue? Don't know where to turn? Unable to cope? Feeling stretched and ready to snap, sort of like a piece of saltwater taffy in a boardwalk window?

Well, don't look to us. We don't care about your problems. We wipe our asses with your problems. We *thrive* on your problems. You'll get no sympathy from us, and certainly no advice.

In an odd way, we're like psychiatrists. You can regurgitate your most hideous psychic pottage two feet beneath our snouts, and all we'll do is ask in a tinny voice for you to elaborate. You can bare your darkest secrets in their nudest agony, and we'll respond with all the tender emotion of a jail warden doing a rectal search. There's one crucial difference between us and psychiatrists, though—we *admit* that we're not helping you.

Several rungs below your typical doctorate-bearing shrink sits the telephone counselor, plying his or her rudimentary community-college training toward skimpy hourly wages and rapid emotional burnout. Perhaps the quickest burn comes from suicide counseling, a job whose only reward is knowing that

you've prolonged some chronic loser's misery.

Firm believers in fair play, we chose to give a little of that misery back. Posing as "Jenny," a verbally abusive suicidal clerk in a Long Beach bubble-gum factory, Debbie called a series of suicide hotlines nationwide. There were sweet moments in nearly every call—a particularly cherished bit of repartee was when a Jamaican counselor from New York responded positively when "Jenny" offered to suck his cock. He teasingly claimed that his wife "doesn't have to know about it." But it was a call "Jenny" placed to a calmly robotic female phone jockey in Florida which seemed to encapsulate all that we detest about shrinkdom. Debbie tossed question after soul-searching question to this slave of psychotherapeutic lingo, only to have each question thrown back into her odorless lap.

This is the crisis line. May I help you?
Is this the suicide hotline?

Yes, it is. May I help you?

Well, I was wondering if you people could give me recommendations on what might be the best method.

I'm sorry—the best method for what?
To kill myself.

What's happening?

Well, what's a good way to do it? What do you recommend?

I personally don't think there is a good way, but what's happening?

Well, isn't this the suicide hotline? It's not the *anti*-suicide hotline, so you would know. Have you ever tried to kill yourself?

No, I haven't.

What would you think is the least painful way?

That's something that I don't really know. Is there something that I can help you with?

Well, what's a good way for me to kill myself? *That's* what you could help me with. This isn't the Padlock Society, is it?

What kind of problems are you having?

Are you my friend? I mean, what do you mean by that?

I just thought if there was something you wanted to talk about, if you're having some problems that you're trying to sort out, you might want to talk about it.

Well, what's the point of going on? I mean, can you give me three reasons why not to do it? Life sucks. It's plain and simple. I guess you can't give me three reasons, because I hear a pause on your part.

Well, what's happening that makes you feel that way?

Nothing is happening. That's the point. Nothing's happening. My life sucks, and I want to know, if this is the suicide hotline, if you people can give me recommendations on what might be a nice, clean, painless method.

And that we can't do.

Can you make my life better? I mean, what are you gonna do? Are you gonna be my friend?

What's wrong with your life?

Everything. It sucks! What's so great? I don't hear you—I mean, you're not giving me an answer, so I guess it's—I have a loaded gun here, you know. I have a gun in my apartment, and, I mean, if you can't give me three reasons why not to kill myself, it's goodbye, world.

That sounds like you've spent some time thinking about it.

I'm thirty-nine years old. I've spent since I was twelve years old thinking about this. Is that enough time?

How much family do you have?

I don't have any family. I live alone. I have nobody. I have not one friend. Next question. What's your next question?

Well, I'm not here to question you. It's not a matter of me trying to argue with your feelings in life, it's just that—

—You don't care what happens to me, do you? To you, it's just a job. [Pause] Well, you're not denying it.

Well, as a matter of fact, it's not just a job.

Well, help me out. Like, what do you suggest? You can't give me three reasons why I should keep going on. You can't give me a way that it would be painless. I have nothing to offer the world. The world has nothing to offer me. What do you suggest?

What have you been doing for thirty-nine years?

I work in a factory. I'm a secretary in a bubble-gum factory in Long Beach, California. I live completely alone. My husband died. Wherever I go, people give me a look like I smell or something. Everywhere I go, people give me a look like there's something wrong with me, like I look unusual. They always give me that LOOK. You know, I can tell you don't like me, either. This is just a job for you.

[Pause] I don't know what I can say to change your mind about the way you feel.

I guess that you don't have a high success rate, because you don't seem to be able to say anything. You're like everybody else. [Long pause] SAY SOMETHING! Tell me something! There's no reason to go on living?

Actually, I'm here for you to vent your feelings, and that's exactly what you're doing.

Well, people call you and they don't kill themselves afterwards? [Pause] I guess you don't have a very high success rate, because you don't seem to be very good at counseling. [Makes crying sounds] You're not giving me any reason why I should go on.

There are reasons, probably, deep down deep [sic].

Like what? [More crying sounds] Everybody hates me! My life is a failure. [Screaming] WHY SHOULD I GO ON? WHAT IS THERE TO LIVE FOR, HUH? TELL ME! WHAT IS THERE TO LIVE FOR?

[Calmly] What has made you happy in the past?

[Yet more crying sounds] Nothing! Nothing has made me happy!

You haven't had any moments of satisfaction?

I've been miserable for the last—since I was twelve years old, I've been miserable. Well, are you gonna help me? What is your advice? What is your advice? What is this place that I've called?

You said you were married.

And my husband is dead!

Didn't you have happiness while you were married?

He never paid attention to me. [Sighs] He's gone. He's in the box. What does it matter? I have not one friend. I live alone. I work in a goddamned bubble-gum factory in Long Beach, California. What kind of life do I have?

Where are you now?

I'm in Long Beach, California. [Long pause] I hear a lot of silence on your part.

Well, I'm just amazed that—

—What are you amazed about?

That you could be so unhappy and not be able to think of things that have made you happy in the past.

This is called the [BLANKETY-BLANK] Suicide and Crisis Hotline, correct? People call you and they say they're happy?

No, but they do normally want somebody to listen to them.

Well, I don't need someone to listen to me, lady. I need some answers. You know, maybe a lot of people like to talk just to hear themselves talk, but I think I need some serious answers here. I can talk to the four walls in my apartment. I need answers! [Pause] I guess you just don't know what it's like to really feel real, real, true pain. You just make, what, how much do you make an hour? Seventeen bucks?

I think you have totally the wrong idea about what the crisis line is for, and I'm not here to change your mind about that, but I am here to listen to you, if you want to talk about your feelings.

My feelings are that my life is HELL! Absolute HELL! When I wake up, I wish I was dead! I walk around, I'm a living dead person. And I want some advice. A recommendation for a painless, nice way to kill myself. I'm afraid the gun might be a little too messy, and who's gonna clean it up? They may not find my body for months, or maybe until the rent is due. So what do you recommend?

I just got through telling you that I can't recommend a way for you to do something that I don't believe in.
Well, what do you believe in?

I don't think that suicide is the answer to solving problems.

What is the answer? What is your name? If you want to be my friend, I'd like to know your first name.

My name is Wanda. What's your name?

Jenny.

Jenny.

Yeah. Uh, Wanda, what is the answer?

In some people's cases, the answer is looking to help other people who are less fortunate. That's not the answer for everyone. But for some people, that's the answer.

How am I gonna help? Wherever I go, people give me that look. They look at me like I'm poison!

[Pause] Ever since you were twelve?

Yes. Ever since I was twelve.

What happened when you were twelve?

I just came to the realization one day that, you know, that life seemed to have nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing to offer me.

[Pause] And you fell in love and got married and nothing changed?

Well, my husband, we were married a very short, brief time, and my husband died. He had a heart attack. He was much older than me.

No thought of ever getting married again someday?

How can I get married? People don't even TALK to me! I work in a factory. I go to work, I do my job. Nobody talks to me. I get on the bus. I do not communicate with anybody ALL DAY! Nobody talks to me, and I don't talk to anybody. Is that a life? I'm thirty-nine—what have I got to go on for? What is there to look forward to tomorrow?

You must have things outside the factory that you have thought about doing.

I have no interests whatsoever. I just sit in front of the television all night long, drinking hot chocolate.

Do you read?

I once in a while read the *National Enquirer*, the *Weekly World News*, the *Globe*, uh, the *TV Guide*. That's about it. Once in a while, the newspaper.

Have you ever thought about writing?

Uh, I wrote a little bit, and it was very, very depressing. It was just about how much I don't understand why people give me that look. And I couldn't really come to any conclusions whatsoever. So, I mean, you know, it was just garbage.

Have you tried going to a counselor?

I went to a counselor, and all they do is sit there, and they don't give me advice. They just sit there, and they want me to talk about my feelings, and I need some answers. After a while, I run out of stuff to talk about. I mean, you know, I can go and pay money and the same thing is discussed. I feel miserable. My life stinks! And no one seems to have any answers. They just keep looking at me like I'm poison! Like I'm an alien from another planet!

Have you tried volunteering someplace where people really need you?

I tried, but the people always seemed to give me that look again, like I'm so different from them. They just hate me! As soon as they meet me, they hate me! And I hate myself, and I don't want to live anymore, and as [far as this] being the suicide hotline, I thought that you could give me some nice recommendations of easy ways to kill myself. Isn't that what this phone service is all about?

No. And I think you know that, that we don't tell people how to kill themselves.

Well, it's called the suicide hotline, so I just assumed that that's what its purpose is.

And where did you get the number from?

I got the phone number in some newspaper. I wouldn't call anywhere locally, because you know how it is in California. Nobody cares, and I figured in a small town, like where you're in—[DELETED]—I don't even know where [DELETED] is in Florida. Maybe you're near Miami. Is that where you are?

No, it's closer to the Cape.

Oh. Cape Cod?

No, it's closer to Cape Kennedy. Cape Canaveral.

Oh. And I figured in a small town like that, maybe people would be more caring, more kind, more gentle. I mean, what's so great about life? I can't find any redeeming values.

I think what's great about life is what you're able to do with it.



Well, I haven't been able to do anything. I consider myself a failure to be thirty-nine years old and still be working in a factory. I have not one friend. And every night I sit in front of the TV set. I don't think I'm doing much with my life. What's the point?

Well, it sounds like the point is trying something that does make you feel better.

Nothing makes me feel better. Nothing. I'm never happy. [Pause] What do you look like, Wanda?

Uh, I don't really know. I haven't—uh, I haven't dwelled on, uh, what I look like, because people don't normally see me.

Well, don't you look in the mirror? You must know what you look like. How old are you?

But this call isn't about me. This call's about you.

Well, I'm talking to you. You know, we're on the phone quite a while. I'm curious how old you are and what you look like. You know all this information about me.

But that's because you called and wanted to talk.

Well, I'm curious, you know. I'm probably not going to be around much longer. I really feel miserable. It would make me feel better to know what you look like and how old you are.

That's not something that I want to reveal.

I guess you don't want to make me feel better. Because, I mean, we're never gonna meet. Why can't you confide in me your age?

That's not something that's important in your life. What's important in your life is what you do with your life, not what I do with mine.

Well, it's important for me to know right now what you look like and how old you are.

How could that possibly make a difference?

Because we're on the phone. I'm curious to know what you look like. And, by the way, my husband had that heart attack during sex, in case you were wondering about that. [Pause] How old are you, Wanda?

I was more concerned about you.

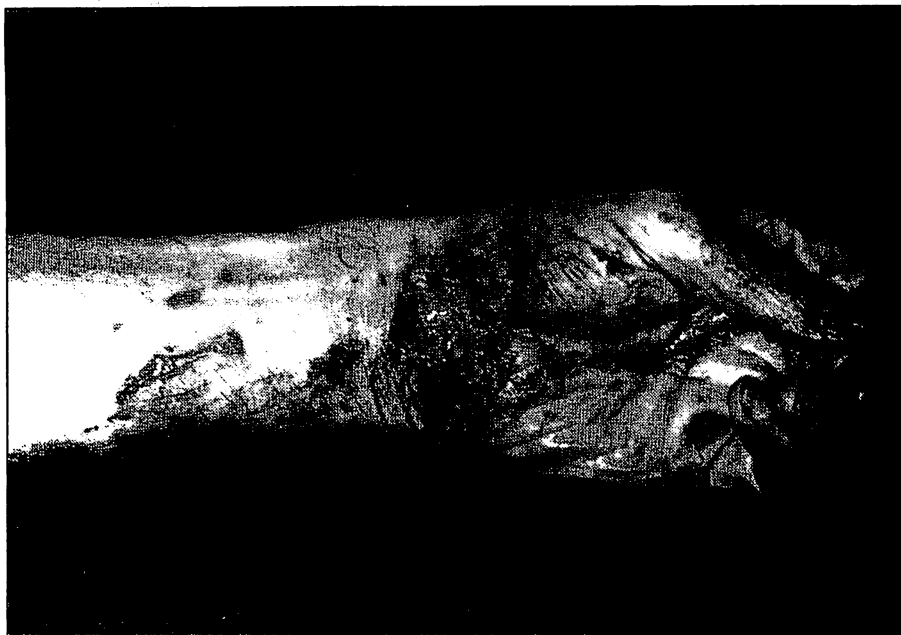
Well, I just confided a very personal detail to you, that my husband had the heart attack during sex. If I could confide such a PERSONAL, PERSONAL detail to you, I'd like you to tell me your age.

And that I'm not ready to tell you.

So you don't care. You're just like all the rest.

It's not a matter of caring.

This is just a job for you. You can't give me the simple consideration of being one human being to another.



You know, I have not one friend in the world. If you were my friend, you would tell me how old you are and what you look like.

I'm not saying I'm your friend. I'm saying that I'm here if you want to discuss things that you could possibly do with your life that wouldn't make you feel so miserable. But there's nothing. There's nothing, Wanda. I can't think of anything, and obviously you can't, either.

You're not a very open person.

I've confided so much stuff to you, you know. I don't know you, either, and yet I'm confiding all this personal stuff, and you're telling me I'm not an open person? I think that's very wrong.

You're not being open about what has made you feel so miserable. What happened when you were twelve? Nothing special. I just one day woke up and realized that life sucked and people sucked, and I realized that I felt very different from everybody and I would never get accepted. I would never be in life's little clique. I would always be the outcast.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

I have an older brother, but we were never very close. We have nothing in common. We're very different.

What were your parents like?

Well, my mother is dead, and my father I haven't spoken to in a couple of years. We don't get along. He's remarried, and he's a real imbecile. I was never really into the family trip, and they were pretty overprotective while I was growing up.

Being that they cared.

I don't know if you—I think it's beyond caring. It was more like a sickness of prying through my pocketbook, going through my night-table stuff, reading personal letters, following me, listening in on phone calls. I think that's beyond caring. I would say that's more, even beyond overprotectiveness, wouldn't you, Wanda?

[Pause] It sounds a little strong, yes.

Yeah. So I'm not into the family at this stage of the game.

But have you been in counseling? You talked to other people about this?

Yeah. I went to about seven different—no, seventeen different counselors, and—no, no—seven. Seven or

seventeen, I don't remember. And no, it wasn't an enjoyable experience, because, like you, they just wanted to listen, and I need some answers, and I mean, these people go to school, they get their M.S.W.s, their Ph.D.s, and with all this college education and this schooling in psychology, how come they can't give me some answers? How come they can only listen? I mean, I can listen and I'd be making a lot more money than I am working in the factory job, believe me. I should be a psychiatrist, because I'm a very good listener, as well.

What schooling have you had?

Oh, I'm a college graduate myself. And isn't it sad that all I could get because of the economy is just a job in a factory? In a bubble-gum factory? I was always in secretarial positions or office type, clerical type of work as well. I'm not a people person, so I probably don't have the, uh, I can't schmooze my way in the business world, I guess.

What do you do for recreation?

Well, once in a while in the past I went bowling, I went to drive-in movies, skeet shooting. Most of the time I just watch television or just stare into space and I try to figure things out, analyze everything, and I never could come up with any conclusions or answers myself.

Were you good at bowling?

No. I wasn't ever good in any sports. I wasn't good in ANYTHING. I never excelled in ANYTHING, Wanda.

How 'bout art?

No. Terrible. [Pause] So can you give me three reasons why not to do it after listening to my sorry tale?

Well, I think that things could be better for ya. How's that?

Well, you're not a dumb person. Uh, there are ways of finding out, uh, your worth in life, and as I said before, volunteering is one of them. Uh, reading to people who are blind, for instance.

Well, they can't give me that LOOK, I guess, 'cause they're blind. They wouldn't be able to see my ugly face.

What is ugly about your face?

I don't know, but people always look at me like I'm ugly, so I must be ugly.

Could it be the way you look at other people?

I don't know. I really don't know, Wanda. I don't like them, and they don't like me, it looks like. But you know what? Maybe I should just order a nice pizza for now. Maybe that would help. Maybe if I got a nice, hot pizza. You know, I don't like it when it's cold, when the cheese sticks to the cardboard. Maybe that's what I should do. I live in Long Beach. Do you know a good place around here that delivers a nice, hot pizza?

No. I was only in Long Beach once.

I guess you don't care, Wanda. You don't even know a pizzeria.

I'm sure you're far more experienced with that.

I really wish you had given me your age and what you look like. I really feel like you're just like all the rest. You want me to divulge all my personal life story to you, but you can't give me some information about you. And that's not fair. It should be a two-way street, Wanda.

[Pause] You called me, and it's your privilege to talk about yourself.

Well, for you it's just a job, because if it was more than that, you would have told me your age and what you look like. You would have been my friend.

You can't develop a friendship over the phone.

A lot of people do. Well, I've read in the newspaper that some people develop friendships over the phone. How else will I make a friend? Maybe we can be phone pals or something. Because I don't have any friends here. You won't even tell me your age, what you look like. What religion are you?

How would you know whether I was telling you the truth or not?

Well, I would hope so. That's another reason why I'm depressed. Because you would LIE to me, Wanda?

No. But by being honest with you, I'm telling you that's not something that I give out. This is not a line for me to

get personal about myself on.

Well, I think it would help if you did.

I'm afraid I have to disagree with you on that.

Do you sign something when you take the job that you're not supposed to divulge what you look like and what your age is to phone callers?

No, but we do, we are trained. We do understand that this is not a place for us to vent our feelings.

You know, I know someone who works on a hotline, and he met his girlfriend through the phone. Obviously, he was divulging something to her, because now they're shackled up together. And you won't even tell me your age.

Is that something that you've tried volunteering for?

I tried, but they don't seem to have any openings. And wherever I go, people just shun me.

How long have you worked at the factory?

I've been working there five years, and I can't get a promotion, because I'm not a people person. So I'm very good at what I do, and the boss knows it. I'm the most efficient worker on the factory line, and every week the boss tells me how wonderful a job I'm doing, but because they realize that I'm not a people person and I don't know how to schmooze, they keep me on the factory line as opposed to the administrative type of jobs. Because the people don't like to work around me.

But you're dependable.

I'm there every day. I was dependable. I went in, I felt miserable. Like a walking dead person. So I've divulged all this personal information to you, Wanda. Does it sound like a happy life?

No, and I think I've mentioned that it sounds like it could get better, that you have possibilities.

What is [sic] the possibilities?

Getting out and doing things for other people.

But I don't get along with people.

Have you tried working with children?

I HATE children. I want to KILL children. I HATE babies. Ugh! There's nothing I hate worse than a baby.

What has your experience been with children?

I just don't like when they scream. They make too much noise. They're ugly. I hate infants. There's nothing to me more DISGUSTING than a newborn baby. If I worked with a child, I would have to kill it. I absolutely HATE children, Wanda. That's the worst idea you could recommend. Next.

[Pause] What have you done in the past that you've had some success with?

Am I the most interesting person who's ever called you?

The most interesting?

Yes. Are you enjoying talking to me? [Pause] Do you like me, Wanda?

I can't honestly say that, no, but I don't know you.
You said you don't like me.

I didn't say that.

What time is it there?

About seven minutes after two [a.m.].

Oh, so you're a night person, huh?

[Unintelligible] Do you like animals?

Animals are pure. Their souls are pure, not like people.

Have you thought about volunteering in an animal shelter?

I tried that, but when I went in, the people treated me like I'm nuts again. Like I'm an alien. They gave me that look.

That's hard to believe.

They ignored me and gave me that look. [Pause] I guess I'll just go order a pizza, 'cause you can't help me. [Hangs up] ■

